# Beyond compare, or

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## or: Some Recent Strategies for Not Comparing Early Christianity with Other Things

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## I.

Comparison is, notionally, a rational or even *wissenschaftlich* undertaking: We take two or more things, observe them side by side (whether in a laboratory or in our minds), and enquire in what relevant respects they are alike or different, in the hope that we will understand one or more of them better as a result.[1] In vernacular usage, however, claims to compare, or not to compare, often function rhetorically as valuations, as expressions of praise or blame for the thing in question. According to this rhetorical commonplace, to say that x is comparable to y is to denigrate x, to put it in low company, while to say that x cannot be compared to y, that x is *beyond compare*, is to praise x. In regard to the former, consider the internet-era axiom known as Godwin's law, which states that "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Hitler approaches 1," because to say that x is in any way comparable to Hitler is to heap scorn on x. In regard to the latter, consider Shakespeare's immortal Sonnet 18: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate," and so on. The denial of comparability is the poet's way of extolling the beloved.

This rhetorical use of claims to compare, or not to compare, is a feature not only of popular discourse but also of academic, which brings us to the theme of the present essay. My purpose here is to examine the ways that some recent, important books in our field have coped with the comparability of early Christianity with its counterparts. (By "its counterparts," here I mean other Graeco-Roman

[1] This essay emerged from my conversations with the other contributors to this volume at the Durham colloquium in June 2017. I have also presented parts of it in draft form at the SBL Annual Meeting, the Nottingham Theology and Religious Studies Seminar, and a meeting of my Edinburgh graduate students. It is much better than it would have been without the incisive feedback of Larry Hurtado, Kavin Rowe, Margaret Mitchell, Francis Watson, Dale Martin, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Philippa Townsend, David Frankfurter, Kyle Harper, Tom O'Loughlin, Simeon Zahl, Jon Hoover, Sara Parks, Matt Sharp, Ryan Collman, Brian Bunnell, Patrick McMurray, Benj Petroelje, Daniel Jackson, Sofanit Abebe, Sydney Tooth, and most of all John Barclay. Any remaining deficiencies are my own fault.

philosophies and religions, in particular Stoicism, although, as I will argue below, the notion of a counterpart for comparison is in fact entirely artificial, stipulated by the scholar for her own heuristic purposes.) As I mean to suggest by my subtitle, "Some Recent Strategies for *Not* Comparing Early Christianity with Other Things," these recent, important books perpetuate—although admittedly in new and sophisticated ways—a longstanding scholarly anxiety at the prospect of comparing early Christianity with other Graeco-Roman philosophies and religions. The two books to be discussed here—Larry Hurtado's *Destroyer of the Gods* and Kavin Rowe's *One True Life*[2]—take very different approaches to the issue; their authors would, I expect, disagree sharply with one another at many points. But both, in their respective ways, illustrate the phenomenon with which I am concerned here, namely, strategies for not comparing.

## II.

The title of Larry Hurtado's 2016 book *Destroyer of the Gods* is actually a line lifted from the second- or third-century *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. The narrator places these words in the mouths of the angry Smyrnean crowd who call for the aged bishop to be thrown to the lions: "The proconsul… sent his herald into the center of the stadium to proclaim three times, 'Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian"… [And] the entire multitude of both Gentiles and Jews who lived in Smyrna cried out with uncontrollable rage and a great voice, 'This is the teacher of impiety, the father of the Christians, *the destroyer of our own gods* [ὁ τῶν ἡμετέρων θεῶν καθαιρέτης], the one who teaches many not to sacrifice or to worship the gods" (*Mart. Poly*. 12.1-2).[3] By this epithet, θεῶν καθαιρέτης, the crowd means that Polycarp teaches against traditional cult and sacrifices. In that sense he destroys—or, alternatively for καθαιρέω, deposes or undermines—the old gods. Hurtado cleverly picks up this *ad hominem* complaint against Polycarp (as imagined by the hagiographer) and repurposes it as an image of the decline of paganism and the rise of Christianity. The dust jacket of the book reads: "How

[2] Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2016); C. Kavin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).
[3] Text and trans. Bart D. Ehrman, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (LCL 24; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Christianity destroyed one world, and created another"; although, of course, neither Polycarp nor any of Hurtado's protagonists could have imagined that Christianity would displace traditional religion as thoroughly as it eventually did.

As it happens, I can remember quite clearly the first time I read the work of Larry Hurtado. It was the mid-2000s, and I was a student in a graduate seminar on early Christian Christology, and our assigned text for the week was Hurtado's opus *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, which had recently been published.[4] I recall being strongly impressed by the erudition on display in that book and aspiring to know all the myriad ancient texts that Hurtado knew. I also recall a vague sense of dissatisfaction with Hurtado's habit of characterising the Christ cult with terms like astonishing, incomparable, unprecedented, unparalleled, and without analogy. Now, by sheer accident of intellectual biography, it was around the same time that I first read Jonathan Z. Smith's *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*,[5] which provided me with categories for making sense of my misgivings about Hurtado's emphasis on incomparability. As is well known, Smith argues in *Drudgery Divine* that scholarship on early Christianity has not yet really reckoned with the problem of comparison, encumbered as it is with received notions of Christian uniqueness. Smith does not appear in the notes of *Destroyer of the Gods*, but I suspect that Hurtado may have had him in mind at some points. *Lord Jesus Christ* had specifically to do with the Christ cult, while *Destroyer of the Gods* takes a wide view of early Christianity as a social phenomenon, but the red thread, it seems to me, is Hurtado's intellectual fascination with anomaly. If Larry Hurtado were a naturalist, then his special expertise would surely be the duck-billed platypus or ambulatory fish or some such.

In *Destroyer of the Gods*, Hurtado presents early Christianity as the ambulatory fish of ancient Mediterranean religions (thus the subtitle: "early Christian *distinctiveness* in the Roman world"). His thesis, in brief, is that "Early Christianity of the first three centuries was a different, even

[4] Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
[5] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

distinctive kind of religious movement in the cafeteria of religious options of the time."[6] On his way to this conclusion, Hurtado makes five key moves, corresponding to the five chapters of the book. In chapter 1, he examines characterizations of early Christians by hostile outsiders—the early Paul, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny the Younger, Galen of Pergamon, Marcus Aurelius, Lucian of Samosata, and the philosopher Celsus—concluding that Christianity was widely perceived as "objectionably different." In chapter 2, Hurtado argues that early Christianity was effectively "a new kind of faith," aberrant enough to have been denied the title "religion" by ancient and modern observers, but deserving the title nonetheless—albeit a new, hitherto unseen kind of religion. In chapter 3, he addresses the category of identity, arguing that early Christianity bestowed a novel *religious* identity on its adherents, leaving their respective *ethnic* identities unchanged, partly analogously to what an exotic foreign cult (e.g., of the Magna Mater) might do, except that Christianity also forbade the offering of cult to one's own ancestral gods. In chapter 4, Hurtado explicates what he calls the bookishness of early Christianity, that is, the prominence accorded by Christians to their holy books and accompanying paraphernalia: scribes, lectors, homilies, codex technology, etc. In chapter 5, finally, Hurtado argues that certain early Christian ethical scruples—in particular, the condemnation of infant exposure, of gladiatorial games, of the sexual use of children, and of extramarital sex generally—put them conspicuously out of step with their contemporaries and constituted "a new way to live."

At the risk of belabouring the zoological metaphors, I am sure that I am not the only reader of *Destroyer of the Gods* who will have found him- or herself thinking of William James's indignant crab. James famously wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, his Edinburgh Gifford Lectures for 1901-1902, "Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. 'I am no such thing,' it would say; 'I am *myself, myself alone.*'"[7] Early Christianity, Hurtado urges, cannot be classed without ado or apology as an ancient Mediterranean religion. It is *itself, itself alone*. To be fair, that is a slight

[6] Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 183.
[7] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Mentor, 1958), 26.

overstatement on my part. Hurtado carefully avoids speaking in absolute terms of Christian uniqueness, opting instead for the language of difference, oddity, strangeness, newness, and especially distinctiveness. But even in this more cautious register, the persistent rejection of all putative analogies and insistence on distinctiveness amounts to a protest against taxonomy.

And this inevitably raises ideological questions. As James comments in his explanatory gloss on the crab's protest, "It is true that we instinctively recoil from seeing an object to which our emotions and affections are committed handled by the intellect as any other object is handled. The first thing the intellect does with an object is to class it along with something else. But any object that is infinitely important to us and awakens our devotion feels to us also as if it must be *sui generis* and unique."[8] James's concern is that the human sciences struggle to give an account of religious experience because human beings—including, of course, scholars of religion—subconsciously perceive religion as something "infinitely important to us," something that "awakens our devotion," something to which "our emotions and affections are committed," rendering it unclassifiable and therefore, strictly speaking, unintelligible. Hurtado, for his part, is pleading for the distinctiveness not of religious experience but of early Christianity. But readers might be forgiven for wondering, in a Jamesian manner, whether his plea is for something infinitely important to the author, something that awakens his devotion, something to which his emotions and affections are committed. And in fact, Hurtado writes in his opening chapter, "One should not and cannot pretend to have a superhuman objectivity or even a lofty disinterest in the subject [of early Christianity]… I would be inclined to distrust any claim to such disinterested objectivity."[9] This postmodern caveat aside, however, Hurtado insists that what he is doing is not religious advocacy but historical description: "I… wish to approach the question of how early Christianity was distinctive, doing so neither in the service of Christian apologetics nor from an aggressive and skeptical stance toward Christian faith."[10]

I take Hurtado at his word here, but I also think that the claim that early Christianity was different from everything else—because of the particular differences such a claim chooses to

[8] James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 26.
[9] Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 6-7.
[10] Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 7.

highlight and the particular samenesses it chooses to pass over—has a quite particular rhetorical (not to say apologetic) effect, regardless of the author's intentions. (There is another postmodern caveat for you.) The principal objection invited by Hurtado's argument—namely, that he ignores aspects of Christian sameness that would be inconvenient for his thesis—lies in plain sight almost from the first page. This is not Hurtado's first rodeo, so he anticipates this objection and bats it away repeatedly throughout the book. For instance: "Of course, I note again that early Christian exclusivism in matters of worship was not totally unique. It echoed the stance of the Jewish religious matrix… But, nevertheless, I think that we can distinguish [the former from the latter]."[11] And again: "In ascribing a distinctiveness to early Christianity in certain social and behavioral practices, I intend no stereotype of the Roman era—for example, as one of simple decadence and a moral wasteland… But, all the same, it was… a time when people legally and without qualms… engaged in some practices that… we would regard as abhorrent."[12] And again: "Early Christianity was distinctive, but not absolutely so or in every respect. At a certain level of generalization, we could note [some similarities]."[13] And again: "Certainly, Christianity did not fall from the sky like some foreign object. It was a historical phenomenon and can be studied as such. But it would be facile, and poor historical analysis, to ignore the very real ways in which early Christianity was a novel and distinctive development."[14] Taken together, however, these numerous concessions add up to a quite different thesis than the one Hurtado argues: Christianity is very much *like* other ancient Mediterranean religions in being a historical phenomenon, in not having fallen from the sky, and so on.

And what about the many other, more specific samenesses? Again to his credit, all along the way, Hurtado dutifully records numerous examples of what a critic might take to be defeaters for his hypothesis, that is, points at which ancient Jews, Greeks, Romans, and others actually share what are ostensibly Christian distinctives. The Christians refuse to offer cult to the pantheon of gods, but so do the Jews. The Christians orient their ritual lives around sacred books, but so do the rabbis. The Christians look after the material needs of their comrades, but so do the trade guilds and burial

[11] Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 89.
[12] Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 144.
[13] Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 186.
[14] Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods*, 187.

associations. The Christians urge voluntarist devotion to a god other than one's ancestral god, but so do the mysteries of Isis or Mithras. The Christians believe in a transcendent high god, but so do the Platonists. The Christians condemn the exposure of infants, but so do the Stoics. The Christians condemn the gladiatorial games, but so, again, do the Stoics. The Christians condemn sex acts with children, but so, yet again, do the Stoics. (What is it about these Stoics? We shall return to them below.) Hurtado concedes each of these cases, and others beside, but he nevertheless persists in characterising such features as Christian distinctives. He reasons that the rabbis, or the trade guilds, or the Stoics do not hold belief x or undertake practice y in just the way that the Christians do. And that is of course true. But the converse is also true: The Christians do not condemn pederasty in just the way or for just the reasons that the Stoics do; hence, by the same logic, we could speak of condemnation of pederasty as a Stoic distinctive.[15]

Or we could, as I found myself doing whilst reading *Destroyer of the Gods*, think of religious distinctiveness, of the kind Hurtado is trying to get at, as a property inhering not in particular features but in clusters of features, or, we might say, cocktails of features. Consider the cocktail metaphor. The Manhattan, an enthusiast might say, is utterly distinctive among all its cocktail brethren. It is a sublime combination of rye whiskey, sweet vermouth, and aromatic bitters. Yes, but, a killjoy comparativist might interject, an Old Fashioned also has rye. And a Negroni also has vermouth. And an Amaretto Sour also has bitters. So the Manhattan is not really so distinctive, after all, is it? But perhaps the distinctiveness that the Manhattan enthusiast wants to praise lies not in the rye, nor in the vermouth, nor in the bitters, but in their being mixed in just those amounts, at just that temperature, and so on. That is what makes the Manhattan so very Manhattan-y. And I can imagine an analogous explanation of what makes early Christianity so very Christian, or Stoicism so very Stoic, or the

[15] Cf. the apt example cited by Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 40: "Such formulations are necessarily relative *and* reciprocal. If the Gospel of Mark is different from Iamblichus's *Life of Pythagoras*, so is Iamblichus different than Mark, so are both different from the Gospel of Matthew, and from Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras*. Difference abounds."

Mithras cult so very Mithraic. But it would be a rather different explanation than the one Hurtado offers.[16]

As for the explanation that Hurtado offers, two questions, in particular, merit further reflection. First, was early Christianity, *viewed as a social whole*, really so conspicuously different as Hurtado suggests? He says that early Christianity *as such* forbade offering cult to the old gods, taking multiple sexual partners, etc. But of course we have ample anecdotal evidence from antiquity of lay Christians doing and approving just these (ostensibly forbidden) things. For Hurtado, however, "early Christianity" is represented by the epistles, homilies, and treatises of orthodox, orthoprax spokesmen: by the apostle Paul, not his Corinthian gentiles-in-Christ who celebrated temple meals to the old gods; by the Bithynian Christians who refused Pliny's instruction to burn incense to the emperor, not those who consented to do so; and so on. This decision about what one allows to count as "early Christianity" is—to indulge in understatement—not the only one that a historian of early Christianity might make.[17] To paraphrase and repurpose Paula Fredriksen's *bon mot* about Judaism and Jews: early Christianity did not teach anything; early Christians did.

Second, even if we agree, for the sake of argument, to let "early Christianity" mean the austere religion of a Paul, a Polycarp, or a Justin, do the standard pagan criticisms thereof actually treat it as something *sui generis*? To be sure, it is, in Hurtado's nice turn of phrase, "objectionably different," but in fact, objectionably different religions are themselves a genus, indeed, a genus with old, conventional names in both Greek and Latin: δεισιδαιμονία and *superstitio*.[18] When Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny call Christianity a *superstitio*, so far from declaring it unlike anything else on offer, they are expressly classing it within a well-populated subset of Graeco-Roman religions. From their perspective, the Christians are emphatically not unprecedented or unparalleled; they are like

[16] Consistently with this metaphor, I think it best, as a rule of thumb, not to speak of "Christian distinctiveness" at all, because doing so masks (either naively or deceptively) the artificiality and reciprocity of the comparison.

[17] For a hint of the other possibilities, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "From Patristics to Early Christian Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7-41; Karen L. King, "Which Early Christianity?" in ibid., 66-84.

[18] See Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Chaldean astrologers, or Thessalian witches, or, indeed, Jews (a barbarian *superstitio*, according to Cicero, of course [*Flacc*. 67]). To be sure, the Christians fall afoul of traditional εὐσέβεια or *pietas*, but there have always been groups that do that. That is why we have the words δεισιδαιμονία and *superstitio*. Viewed from this angle, Christianity is not a new kind of faith, but an old kind of deviance.

A few years ago, there was a brief but fascinating exchange of letters in the *New York Review of Books* between two titans of late antique scholarship, Ramsay MacMullen and Peter Brown. In response to a glowing review by Brown of Alan Cameron's *The Last Pagans of Rome*,[19] MacMullen wrote a letter to the editors entitled "The Tenacity of Paganism," urging that paganism was not eclipsed by Christianity but persisted for centuries in myriad forms of popular Christian piety.[20] In reply to MacMullen's letter, Brown wrote, "Whether everything that average Christians did was automatically 'pagan' and a 'survival' of pagan practice is less certain for me than it is for Professor MacMullen. His work seems to take too seriously the denunciations of the clergy—for whom any practice other than their own austere version of Christianity seemed suspect and vaguely 'pagan.' I would call it, simply, human."[21] Hurtado's *Destroyer of the Gods* excels at describing historical particularity, but by driving a wedge between Christianity and everything else, it allows for precious little of the human in early Christianity.

III.

Kavin Rowe's 2016 book *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* likewise has problems with the category of the human, but they are a quite different set of problems. This is what I mean:[22] Humanistic scholarship, in all its varied fields of study, proceeds on the assumption that we can, with hard work, achieve a degree of understanding of people who are separated from us by oceans, centuries, beliefs, and otherwise. *Humani nihil a me alienum puto*, as

[19] Peter Brown, "Paganism: What We Owe the Christians," *New York Review of Books* (April 7, 2011).
[20] Ramsay MacMullen, "The Tenacity of Paganism," *New York Review of Books* (June 9, 2011).
[21] Peter Brown, reply to Ramsay MacMullen, *New York Review of Books* (June 9, 2011).
[22] Bits and pieces of the following are excerpted and revised from my review of *One True Life* in *ExpTim* 129 (2018): 238.

Terence put it. Or, closer to home, τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος εἰμέν, as Aratus put it, and Paul (according to Luke) agreed.[23] We are not ourselves Vestal virgins or stylite monks, but by careful study and sympathetic imagination we can begin to understand the lives they lived and the choices they made. Or can we? Rowe thinks that we cannot, at least not in regard to traditions of life (Rowe's term, repurposed from Alasdair MacIntyre)[24] such as Stoicism and Christianity. A tradition, Rowe claims, is the kind of thing that cannot be understood except by living it exclusively and in full.[25] When it comes to Stoics and Christians, on Rowe's account, it takes one to know one.[26]

But if this is the case, then no one person could be both Stoic and Christian, nor could a Stoic and his Christian neighbour experience an actual meeting of minds about their respective traditions. They could relate to one another only as rivals, or not at all. Historically, Stoics and Christians did in fact relate to one another; hence Rowe concludes that they were (and are) rivals. In one corner, Rowe gives us a chapter each on Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius representing the Stoics, and in the

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[23] The latter reference here is a bit mischievous, since Rowe has argued eloquently elsewhere (C. Kavin Rowe, "The Grammar of Life: The Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition," *NTS* 57 [2011]: 31-50) that, at least in Luke's appropriation of it (Acts 17:28), Aratus's maxim does not mean what I am suggesting it means. Rowe's argument is eloquent, but not convincing.

[24] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Traditions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), e.g., at 59-61: "A third possibility [is]… that reason can only move toward being genuinely universal and impersonal insofar as it is neither neutral nor disinterested, that membership in a particular type of moral community, one from which fundamental dissent has to be excluded, is a condition for genuinely rational enquiry and more especially for moral and theological enquiry…. For part of what put the philosophical tradition which runs from Socrates to Aquinas at odds with the philosophical thought of modernity, whether encyclopaedic or genealogical, was both its way of conceiving philosophy as a craft, a *techne*, and its conception of what such a craft in good order is."

[25] Rowe, *One True Life*, 184: "A tradition of inquiry, for MacIntyre, is thus a morally grained, historically situated rationality, a way of asking and answering questions that is inescapably tied to the inculcation of habits in the life of the knower and to the community that originates and stewards the craft of inquiry through time. *Tradition* in this sense is the word that best describes the forms of life that were ancient Christianity and Stoicism." And ibid., 204: "[The] inability to live more than one tradition at a time means that in a crucial and, truth be told, rather sobering sense, even the central patterns of reasoning in one tradition—as that tradition understands them—will not be understood in another."

[26] On this notion, see Jeffrey Stout, "Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics," *JRE* 25 (1997): 23-56 at 34-35: "The epistemology behind the ecumenical model of religious scholarship tends to be, as Henry Levinson once put it, that it takes one to know one…. [But] all serious work in the humanities is predicated on the maxim—call it Levinson's law—that it *does not* take one to know one. Religious ethicists would do well to nail this aphorism to the lintels of their office doors, that every student might see it there. Understanding ancient text, distant cultures, or strange mores is intrinsically valuable, potentially useful, and likely to be difficult. The faith that such understanding is, in principle, possible is a normative assumption as well as a hopeful one, but it is implicit in the work of all scholars in the humanities."

other corner, a chapter each on Paul, Luke, and Justin Martyr representing the Christians. These chapters are meticulously researched and artfully written. But Rowe's ambitious claim that the relation among these thinkers can only be conceived as a two-sided, zero-sum contest would have come as news to Tertullian, Origen, and Jerome, among other ancient Christians, who famously regarded Stoic teachers (e.g., Seneca) and Stoic ideas (e.g., *autarkeia*) not with enmity but with profound sympathy.[27] Now, we might reasonably wonder whether these ancient Christians were over-sanguine in their presumption of Stoic-Christian homonoia, and we can agree with Rowe that, for the most part, even they still envisioned an optimal state of affairs where Seneca or Musonius Rufus converted fully and finally to Christianity. But Tertullian, Origen, and Jerome knew their Stoics, they knew that they knew them, and they did not remotely think it an epistemic impossibility to do so.

This is an important point, because one of Rowe's key claims in *One True Life* is that the ancients would have agreed with his existentialist, sectarian account of epistemology, and that only naïve modern encyclopaedists (Rowe's preferred term, on which see below) would disagree with it. He writes, "The ancients put it to us moderns in a way that makes us uneasy or even squirm. They would give us a pill that neither Stout nor MacIntyre, Malherbe nor Engberg-Pedersen, Levering nor Cochran, can swallow. It is, frankly, just that difficult for us to believe that if we will not enter a way of life, the door to understanding is shut upon us."[28] Let us leave aside for the moment Rowe's remarkable claim to stand outside modernity, on the side of the ancients, from whence he would diagnose the rest of us as moderns.[29] In fact it is Rowe himself, not the ancients, who would have us

[27] Rowe denies that they did so. See Rowe, *One True Life*, 260-261: "[I] redescribe what the Christians have been doing…. The Christians have been treasure hunting. The treasures they find are the words in the Stoic texts, not the Stoic 'thoughts' that are somehow independent from the Stoic grammar in which thoughts have their shape and meaning." Against this, however, ancient Christians did not need Stoic texts to find the words *pneuma*, *autarkeia*, *philanthropia*, and so on. Those words were available before and apart from the Stoics. It was the way the Stoics used these widely current words that ancient Christians appreciated and with which they sympathized.

[28] Rowe, *One True Life*, 257.

[29] In regard to this claim, Jeffrey Stout's comment about Alasdair MacIntyre and John Millbank applies equally well to Rowe: "I applaud such openness [viz. that of MacIntyre and Millbank about their normative commitments], but I wonder whether we in religious ethics have been as suspicious of their rhetorical stratagems as we ought to have been. These writers announce themselves as debunkers of *modern* ethical discourse, as champions of a *traditional* alternative to it. Evidently, a large distinction is at work—on behalf of normatively charged business. We participate in modern ethical discourse, do we not? It behooves us to be on our guard" (Stout, "Commitments and Traditions," 38). And again, "[MacIntyre] belongs to a prominent strand of romantic ethical discourse that has never

swallow this pill. To be sure, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Paul, Luke, and Justin make strong truth claims, and, at least in a significant number of cases, they think that believing these truth claims entails existential kinds of commitment. But contrary to Rowe's too-easy generalization, they do not insist that a person cannot understand them except by living their lives. This lattermost claim is not Luke's or Seneca's or even MacIntyre's, but Rowe's and Rowe's alone.

On Rowe's idiosyncratic premises, not only can a Stoic not understand a Christian, nor a Christian a Stoic. Neither, for that matter, can any human being (Stoic, Christian, Platonist, Hegelian, Muslim, Buddhist, agnostic, or otherwise) stand outside Stoicism and Christianity and compare the two. Stoicism and Christianity are, as far as human minds are concerned, *incomparable*. Of course, it is an empirical fact that scholars of ancient philosophy and religion compare Stoicism and Christianity all the time. But Rowe argues that all such research is in vain, that to undertake it is a fool's errand. Modern comparativists—Rowe rightly identifies Troels Engberg-Pedersen and the late Abraham Malherbe as exemplars—are tried and found guilty of the epistemic sin of encyclopaedism, which Rowe borrows from MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (MacIntyre's Edinburgh Gifford Lectures for 1988), inflating it for his own polemical purposes.

Encyclopaedism, according to MacIntyre, was the dominant theory of knowledge among late-nineteenth-century intellectuals in Britain, a faith in "the assent of all educated persons to a single substantive conception of rationality,… the elaboration of a comprehensive, rationally incontestable scientific understanding of the whole,… [and a vision of] their whole mode of life, including their conceptions of rationality and of science, as part of a history of inevitable progress, judged by a standard of progress which had itself emerged from that history."[30] For MacIntyre, quite plausibly, the exemplars of encyclopaedism were the Victorian editors of the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1875-1889), while for Rowe, less plausibly, its exemplars are more or less all contemporary New Testament scholars. Rowe writes, "My basic critical contention is that we cannot

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been far to find in the modern period and has always relied, in just the way MacIntyre does, on the rhetoric of ruin and fragmentation. It is a very modern form of ethical discourse, but also a form that has a stake in not being able to recognize itself as belonging to the setting against which its criticism is directed" (ibid., 45).

[30] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 23-24.

hope to understand the Stoic/Christian relation if we continue to read them in the way we usually have. Encyclopedic inquiry—the name for the epistemic assumptions of the vast majority of modern scholarly work on the Stoics and the New Testament—is dead and gone. We should take notice."[31]

MacIntyre's threefold rubric of modes of enquiry is not immune to criticism.[32] But let us grant, for the sake of argument, that it is. Even so, Rowe's application of it to contemporary scholarship on Stoicism and Christianity does not follow and is in fact mistaken. Consequently, a colossal straw man looms. To demonstrate: Here is Thomas Spencer Baynes, chief editor of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in his 1875 prefatory note to volume 1, the fullest statement of the epistemology presupposed by the makers of the Encyclopaedia:

> The work, while surveying in outline the existing field of knowledge, was able at the same time to enlarge its boundaries by embodying, in special articles, the fruits of original observation and research. The Encyclopaedia Britannica thus became, to some extent at least, an instrument as well as a register of scientific progress…. [The Encyclopaedia] has to do with knowledge rather than opinion, and to deal with all subjects from a critical and historical, rather than a dogmatic, point of view. It cannot be the organ of any sect or party in Science, Religion, or Philosophy. Its main duty is to give an accurate account of the facts and an impartial summary of results in every department of inquiry and research.[33]

And here is MacIntyre, in 1988, giving his account of Baynes's theory of knowledge: "The encyclopaedist's conception is of a single framework within which knowledge is discriminated from mere belief, progress toward knowledge is mapped, and truth is understood as the relationship of *our* knowledge to *the* world, through the application of those methods whose rules are the rules of

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[31] Rowe, *One True Life*, 2.

[32] See especially the author's postscript in Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (2d ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), here 350: "[MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions* examines] the styles of moral inquiry associated with the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, with Nietzsche, and with modern Thomism. The point of the exercise is to vindicate Thomism's superiority to its rivals. But suppose we grant that Thomism wins this three-sided contest. The exercise reinforces MacIntyre's account of modernity only if the encyclopedists and the Nietzscheans are the best modern competitors one could find to test the strength and weaknesses of Thomism…. We do well to remind ourselves that those years [1875-1900] also include [historic contributions from Walt Whitman, Frederick Douglas, William Morris, William James, Frances Willard, John Ruskin, John Dewey, and John Muir]. MacIntyre's three rivals are important ones, but they do not adequately represent the ethical vitalities of the age."

[33] T. S. Baynes, "Prefatory Notice," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed., vol. 1 (New York: Scribners,1878), v, viii.

rationality as such."[34] A bit overwrought, perhaps, but not grossly unfair to Baynes and his collaborators, in any case.

Now, here is Troels Engberg-Pedersen, in the introductory "Essay in Interpretation" of his 2000 *Paul and the Stoics*, a landmark in the study of ancient Stoicism and Christianity:

> The approach adopted here has three logical parts: (i) In its existentially neutral, historical-critical aspect it is dedicated to making as much historical sense as possible of Paul's thought-world taken in its entirety…. (ii) By almost exclusively focusing on ideas, it differs from an approach like Meeks' [on social history]. But otherwise it should be understood as being informed by an underlying concern just like Meeks' to provide a methodologically-based, comprehensive picture of the intrinsic connections between the various levels of Paul's thought world and between those taken together and his social world. (iii) In its existentially interested aspect it cuts out a sizeable portion of Paul's thought world—the 'anthropological' and 'ethical' one—and attempts to elucidate that both as part of the more comprehensive perspective on the Christ-believing form of life that Paul aims to present to his addressees—but also as constituting a real option for us.[35]

And here, finally, is Rowe, marking Engberg-Pedersen's *Paul and the Stoics* as exhibit A of a putative twenty-first-century encyclopaedism:

> [According to Engberg-Pedersen,] modern scholars can focus on ideas as ideas; these ideas are expressed in a universally intelligible 'natural' language; this natural language corresponds intellectually to the etic discourse of modern scholarship; modern scholarship is itself, therefore, the universal language, the most conceptually comprehensive discourse, that which can restate, or translate, all emic expressions/claims in its own terms…. [Engberg-Pedersen illustrates] the more fundamental assumptions and intellectual parameters of an entire modern scholarly project—that of mistaking traditions for entries in an encyclopedia.[36]

Not to put too fine a point on it, if Engberg-Pedersen's introduction to *Paul and the Stoics* is encyclopaedism, then I'll eat my hat. Engberg-Pedersen robustly affirms the unity of intellection and life, the recognition of ancient Stoicism and Christianity as forms of life, and the legitimate existential interest of modern interpreters in those same forms of life, all of which Rowe accuses him of denying. Rowe is accurate, to be sure, in noting Engberg-Pedersen's willingness to hazard a historical-critical, existentially disinterested reading of a Paul or a Seneca. But that is not encyclopaedism, just

[34] MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*, 42, emphasis original.
[35] Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 28.
[36] Rowe, *One True Life*, 191.

sympathetic historical imagination, which does exist, Rowe's protestations notwithstanding.[37] Rowe speaks repeatedly and contemptuously of how "encyclopedic enquiry is dead and gone." The epistemology of MacIntyre's Victorians is indeed dead and gone, as are the Victorians themselves. But Engberg-Pedersen's position (and, *mutatis mutandis*, the position of other present-day comparativists) is not that epistemology.[38]

*One True Life* is an exciting book, bracing to read and useful to think with. It crackles with the same earnest moral energy that one feels when reading Rowe's heroes, MacIntyre and Blaise Pascal. This is the kind of passage I mean: "Pascal was finally right. We cannot know ahead of the lives we live that the truth to which we devote ourselves is the truth worth devoting ourselves to. So we wager our lives, one way or the other. The tradition of life that is Stoicism is a certain kind of historically dense and elongated wager; so is Christianity. If our being is in becoming, then the wagers we make are on the patterns of life that make who we are. Our being is caught up in them, and we are what we become."[39] As this passage suggests, the burden of Rowe's book really is to exhort his readers to be, or to become, Christians. Or, theoretically, Stoics. (To his credit, Rowe does not claim that Christianity is unique and therefore incomparable. Rather, he claims that both Christianity and Stoicism—and presumably other traditions of life, too, although we do not hear about them—are equally incomparable.) But because Stoicism is not a live option in the way that Christianity is, it is not really a fair fight. A book that did the same thing with, say, Islam and Christianity would be more so. It had not occurred to me until I heard her say it, but Margaret Mitchell is exactly right in her judgment that Rowe's book is a *protreptikos* every bit as much as Clement's book by that name.[40] Not an apologetic, crypto- or otherwise, but a straight-up invitation to live a Christian life.[41] Rowe's invitation will no doubt strike some readers as old-fashioned. It is certainly unusual for a twenty-first-

[37] See Rowe, *One True Life*, 256: "There is no magical quality to imagination that somehow enables it to leap over the existential barrier erected by traditions that claim they must be lived to be learned."
[38] See Engberg-Pedersen's essay in this volume.
[39] Rowe, *One True Life*, 258.
[40] See Mitchell's essay in this volume.
[41] Rowe, *One True Life*, 261: "The grammars of traditions that claim truth in the way the Stoics and Christians do are inherently invitational or kerygmatic. The invitation to enter is simultaneously the condition of true understanding; invitation, that is, names the fact that conversion is the inevitable goal of all traditional speech toward outsiders."

century biblical studies monograph, though not at all unusual for a sermon. For my part, I have no principled objection to this kind of religious advocacy, and I find Rowe's way of doing it genuinely moving. But I do object strongly to his claim that it is the only possible way of talking about ancient Stoicism and ancient Christianity. If *One True Life* is exciting, it is also wrong in this crucial respect.

A sympathetic reader might think that what Rowe really *means* is just that an inhabitant of one tradition is incapable of understanding another tradition *fully*. And indeed, in his essay in the present volume, Rowe comes out somewhere close to this claim.[42] I consider this a welcome development, because closer to the truth. But—in the interest of dealing with Rowe as he wants to deal with the Stoics, taking seriously the difference of another's view and not assimilating it to one's own—that is not the position he takes in *One True Life*. His admirably consistent thesis in the book is that an inhabitant of one tradition is incapable of understanding another tradition, full stop.[43] Rowe even out-MacIntyres MacIntyre himself by denying the capacity of imagination to surmount this difficulty.[44] What Rowe says is that comparison of traditions cannot be done. What he ought to have said is that it can be done but that he, Rowe, finds it not worth doing, that it is too pedantic, superficial, or existentially unimportant to be worth his intellectual energy. He might also think that comparing traditions is not worth anyone's intellectual energy, that converting to and practicing a tradition of life is more than enough to occupy any human being.[45] But that would amount to a

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[42] Rowe, "Making Friends and Comparing Lives," [page number]: "I do not deny and do not think we should deny that human beings who live in roughly the same time and place share all sorts of things in common… [and thus] can understand each other in a regular and important way at the bank or supermarket or pagan festival, and so on"; ibid., [page number]: "We might speak here of a kind of understanding: we understand one another as friends do, even if the grammars of our traditions remain grammars of conflict and summons."

[43] Rowe, *One True Life*, 204: "Short of conversion, we are literally shut out of one [tradition] by the life we live in another. Rival rationalities are not surmountable by learning"; ibid., 262: "The argument of this book rejects the conception of both the human being and traditions of life that would allow us to picture ourselves as able to move noetically between traditions without living different lives. In this significant sense we are stuck in the traditions in which we live." As far as I can tell, the closest the book gets to the concession made in the essay is at Rowe, *One True Life*, 260: "[Ancient Stoics and Christians] lived in roughly the same time and place, after all, and could not help but share some assumptions about this or that; it would be nothing short of stunning if they did not. Such shared assumptions are not, however, as significant as they have been said to be. The most significant assumptions and convictions of each tradition—tradition comprising assumptions and convictions—are precisely those that keep them apart."

[44] Rowe, *One True Life*, 256.

[45] Rowe, *One True Life*, 1: "At its heart, this book is about the fact that we can only live one life. The track from birth to death can be run—or walked, or crawled, or held in the arms of others—only once.

renunciation of all the arts and sciences, which is further than I, at least, am willing to go. We can agree with Rowe's affirmation that the study of philosophy and religion is, or can be, a matter of existential concern, and yet reject Rowe's denial (which is, anyway, a *non sequitur*) of the possibility of comparison. The human mind can *both* compare phenomena *and* make existential decisions. We see human minds do both all the time. Indeed, when we read *One True Life*, we see Kavin Rowe's mind do both. The only problem is his insistence to the contrary.

IV.

I single out *Destroyer of the Gods* and *One True Life* for comment not because they are easy targets but because they are not. Both books make their respective cases about as powerfully as I can imagine these cases being made. Hence, if there are problems, those problems are likely to be with the core claims themselves. And this is in fact the case. Both Hurtado and Rowe demonstrate a thorough command of the mass of ancient evidence, but they organize that evidence selectively and partisanly so as, finally, to recommend early Christianity and thereby (implicitly for Hurtado, explicitly for Rowe) modern Christianity, too. There is a fascinating irony here. Hurtado wants to compare early Christianity with its counterparts but, insofar as he repeatedly vindicates it over against all of them, does not really do so. Rowe, by contrast, wants *not* to compare early Christianity with its counterparts (indeed, he declares such comparison an impossibility), but in fact he executes a number of fruitful comparisons. (He just calls them "juxtapositions," a distinction without a difference.)[46] In short,

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However much we speak metaphorically of aging as an eventual return to the dependence of childhood, no human being has ever grown from an adult to and infant. We all go only one way, toward death. How we should travel this one-way road—if in fact there is a *should*—is a question as old as human reflection on the journey itself. Is there a best or right or true way to live? To what should we entrust ourselves? Can we find healing for what ails us? Can we make it up as we go? Can we waste our lives?"

[46] About comparison, Rowe writes, "The modern comparative project depends upon a philosophical mistake in which a profound abstraction is taken for a real thing and believed to provide the categorical sense in which the work of comparison can be done" (*One True Life*, 192). And about juxtaposition: "If Stoicism and Christianity are seen as traditions of inquiry, the most constructive way to conceive their relation is to think them in direct narrative juxtaposition, face to face. Traditions are of course considerably complex things, but such complexity will always be related to the narrative that makes the tradition what it is" (*One True Life*, 199). But Rowe's "modern comparative project" is a straw man (see my comments above), and what he here calls "juxtaposition" is just comparison by another, more sectarian name.

Hurtado tries to compare but fails; Rowe tries not to compare but succeeds at comparing in spite of himself. The two agree, however, in judging early Christianity to be beyond compare. For Hurtado, it is beyond compare in a poetic sense: When we compare early Christianity to its counterparts, again and again it stands apart from them all. For Rowe, it is beyond compare in a literal sense: It cannot be compared; it can only be converted to and lived.

Why this hang-up? Why should it be such a problem simply to compare early Christianity with other things? The answer includes at least a conceptual and an ideological aspect. First, the conceptual. When comparison goes awry, it usually does so in one of two directions. This is not a novel observation, and it has recently been spelled out with particular clarity by Aaron Hughes, the American scholar of medieval Judaism and Islam.[47] Because comparison always involves making judgments about relative similarity and difference, failures of comparison usually involve a preoccupation with and privileging of *either* similarity *or* difference. In the academic study of religion, the former kind of failure (privileging of similarity) is typical especially of phenomenologists (e.g., Rudolf Otto, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade), who, when they compare bits and pieces of religion, discover the same, universal Numinous or Sacred. The latter kind of failure (privileging of difference) is much more common in the history of research on early Christianity and is the besetting problem with both Hurtado's and Rowe's work. As Smith showed to devastating effect in *Drudgery Divine*, scholars of early Christianity have a congenital habit of thought, an instinct, for claiming Christian uniqueness.[48] Within the logic of this habit of thought, to study early Christianity is nothing other than to explain how it is different from everything else. The scholar of early Christianity knows that her job (in a lecture, an article, a monograph) is done when she has reached and underlined the point of difference. Q.E.D. But this is simply the mirror-image of the phenomenologist's error, the

[47] See Aaron W. Hughes, *Comparison: A Critical Primer* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2017), especially 51-76.

[48] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 38: "[As used in religious studies,] the 'unique' is more phoenix-like, it expresses that which is *sui generis*, *singularis*, and, therefore, *incomparably* valuable. 'Unique' becomes an ontological rather than a taxonomic category; an assertion of a radical difference so absolute that it becomes 'Wholly Other,' and the act of comparison is perceived as both an impossibility and an impiety…. The most frequent use of the terminology of the 'unique' in religious studies is in relation to Christianity; the most frequent use of this term within Christianity is in relation to the so-called 'Christ-event.'"

nonrational choice to fixate on one part of the comparative task—either identifying similarity or identifying difference—and to ignore the other.

Which part of the comparative task the scholar chooses to fixate on, and which to ignore, most often comes down to ideology. By ideology, I mean the whole range of religious, theological, ethical, political, and other kinds of commitments that bear on the scholar's subjectivity. When one or more of the things being compared is, or is perceived to be, closely related somehow to an aspect of the scholar's subjectivity (as in the case of James's crab: "any object that is infinitely important *to us* and awakens *our* devotion"), then it becomes proportionately more difficult for the scholar to think comparison. This phenomenon is more common in the humanities and social sciences than in the laboratory sciences (though it is not absent from the latter), which is why, as Marcel Detienne comments, "When researchers choose to study comparative anatomy, they do not begin by passing a value judgment on the various organs that they plan to consider."[49] A classic example in our subfield is the conspicuous apologetic strand documented by Smith in modern research on the New Testament and the mystery religions. That research, undertaken overwhelmingly by Protestant scholars, labored under a need to demonstrate the ancient Christian sources' freedom from any stain of *pagan* (used as a cipher for *Catholic*) influence. When these scholars compared baptism in the Pauline Christ groups with Mithraic initiation rites, they were really comparing their own piety with that of their Catholic contemporaries. The outcome of this *sogenannte* comparison was decided before the work was even begun.[50]

Religious commitments like these are one powerful kind of comparison-skewing ideology, the most common kind in our field, perhaps, but they are not the only kind. The classicist Detienne,

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[49] Marcel Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable* (trans. Janet Lloyd; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008 [French original 2000]), ix.

[50] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 34: "The pursuit of the origins of the question of Christian origins takes us back, persistently, to the same point: *Protestant anti-Catholic apologetics*. It will be my contention, in the subsequent chapters, that this is by no means a merely antiquarian concern. The same presuppositions, the same rhetorical tactics, indeed, in the main, the very same data exhibited in these early efforts underlie much of our present-day research, with one important alteration, that the characteristics attributed to 'Popery,' by the Reformation and post-Reformation controversialists, have been transferred, wholesale, to the religions of Late Antiquity. How else can one explain, for example, the fact that the most frequent distinction drawn in modern scholarship between the early Christian 'sacraments' (especially the Pauline) and those of the 'mystery cults' is that the latter exhibit a notion of ritual as *ex opere operato*?"

writing about comparative methodology in his field, expresses analogous worries about nationalism among twentieth-century historians: "Societies that lacked civilization and writing were brushed aside. If comparison was to be done, it would be of the 'we have…/they have' variety, provided that the 'they' designated some opposing nation, and it was understood that 'we' had received the lion's share."[51] And just as many modern Christian scholars see themselves as heirs of and coreligionists with the ancient Christians and reason that the latter must have been finally different from other ancients, many modern, Western humanists have done likewise with the ancient Greeks: *We* are the cultural heirs of *them*; hence *they* must have been finally different from their own contemporaries. Detienne writes, "The experimental comparativism of the earliest anthropologists was not able to resist the pressure of western values that insisted on a direct transmission from Greek universality characterized exclusively by Reason, Science, and the incomparable Greek Miracle."[52]

Larry Hurtado tries, far more subtly than his twentieth-century forebears but in continuity with them nonetheless, to trace the lines of the incomparable Christian Miracle. Kavin Rowe, more subtly still, demurs from calling Christianity unique, or even distinctive, but then outstrips Hurtado by claiming that Christianity is literally incomparable, that it does not admit of comparison by human minds. Both Hurtado and Rowe trade in that rhetorical use of the language of comparison that I noted at the beginning of this essay. Like the psalmist to God ("Who is like unto thee?"), or the poet to the beloved ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"), they praise early Christianity by avoiding comparing it with other things, by putting it out of reach, beyond compare. Some forty years ago, Smith wrote that "the possibility of the study of religion depends on [the] answer" to Wittgenstein's question, "How am I to apply what the one thing shows me to the case of two things?"[53] that is, on a theory of comparison.[54] It did, and it does.[55] We could, of course, opt out of the study of religion

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[51] Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*, x.
[52] Detienne, *Comparing the Incomparable*, 7.
[53] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe et al.; 4th rev. ed.; Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010) §215.
[54] Jonathan Z. Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in idem, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 35.
[55] My own purpose in this essay is not to give a new, theoretical answer Wittgenstein's question, but to argue, with Smith and against Hurtado and Rowe, that Wittgenstein's question pertains to early Christianity every bit as much as it does to anything else. For an artful theoretical answer to Wittgenstein's question, see, in addition to Smith, John Barclay's essay in the present volume.

entirely, as Rowe effectively suggests we do, but short of that self-segregating option, there is nothing for it but to wade in and compare early Christianity with other things: Stoicism, Judaism, platypuses, fish, crabs, cocktails, and anything else that helps us to understand.[56]

[56] Once more, Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 51: "There is nothing 'natural' about the enterprise of comparison. Similarity and difference are not 'given.' They are the result of mental operations…. Comparison, in its strongest form, brings differences together within the space of the scholar's mind for the scholar's own intellectual reasons. It is the scholar who makes their cohabitation—their 'sameness'—possible, not 'natural' affinities or processes of history."